### Section A. Mail Screening Process Overview

#### Overview

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| In This Section | This section contains the following topics: |

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| Topic | Topic Name |
| 1 | Overview of the Initial Mail Screening Process |
| 2 | Process for Conducting a Routine Check of Original Claims |
| 3 | Screening Subsequent Claims for Pending Appeals |
| 4 | Individual and Group Responsibilities for Division Mail Management |

#### 1. Overview of the Initial Mail Screening Process

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| Introduction | This topic provides an overview of the initial mail screening process, including * the purpose of initial screening, and
* an overview of the screening process and mail flow.
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| a. Purpose of Initial Mail Screening | The purpose of initial mail screening is to immediately review all incoming applications, correspondence, and evidence to determine if a claim* warrants priority processing because of its nature or facts
* is submitted with evidence that requires immediate review by the rating activity
* is incomplete and requires further development, or
* warrants immediate denial.

***References***: For more information on* screening and processing mail in the centralized mail (CM) portal, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.5
* priority processing, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.D
* submitting claims to the rating activity, see
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart iii, 1.1.f
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart iii, 1.2.b
* M21-1, Part IV, Subpart ii, 1.A.2.c.
* awarding special monthly pension for Aid and Attendance without a rating decision, see M21-1, Part V, subpart iii, 2.B.2.a
* considering insanity as the cause of death, see M21-1, Part IX, Subpart ii, 2.6.a, and
* delegation of responsibilities for the initial screening process, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.A.3.b.
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| b. Overview of the Screening Process and Mail Flow | The table below provides an overview of the screening process. |

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| Stage | Description |
| 1 | Review all incoming material to determine whether it is* a claim or evidence in support of a claim
* an issue in the correct jurisdiction, or
* not a claim.
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| 2 | Depending on the nature of the material, determine whether it is necessary to* obtain additional evidence
* refer the issue to another location or activity, or
* dispose of the issue immediately.
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| 3 | Take the appropriate action. |

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| ***References***: For more information on * general mail processing procedures, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.B, or
* processing mail in the CM portal, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.E.5.
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#### 2. Process for Conducting a Routine Check of Original Claims

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| Introduction | This topic contains information about conducting a routine check of original claims, including* responsibilities of the Intake Processing Center (IPC) or the development activity upon receipt of a claim or appeal
* determining the benefits sought and type of claim
* checking for the proper signature
* processing on-line applications without a signature
* checking for basic eligibility to the benefit sought
* checking for character of discharge
* checking for service verification
* checking for blank spaces on the application or insufficient information, and
* checking for acceptable dependency information.
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| a. Responsibilities of the IPC or the Development Activity Upon Receipt of a Claim or Appeal | Responsibilities of the Intake Processing Center (IPC) or the development activity include* ensuring the claim or appeal is substantially complete
* verifying that basic eligibility exists
* processing all submitted documents properly, and
* updating the records using
* Share corporate data base
* Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS)
* Modern Awards Processing – Development (MAP-D)
* Control of Veterans Records System (COVERS), and/or
* Veterans Appeals Control and Locator System (VACOLS).

***Reference***: For more information on substantially complete claims, see M21-1 Part I, 1.B.1. |

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| b. Determining Benefits Sought and Type of Claim | Follow the steps in the table below to determine the type of claim. |

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| Step | Action |
| 1 | Determine the type of benefit the claimant seeks, based on* the type of application the claimant submitted
* information the claimant provided on the application, and
* any other supporting evidence the claimant submitted.

***Note***: All new claims submitted on or after March 24, 2015, must be filed on a standard Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) application form.***Reference***: For a list of application forms claimants must use to file an original claim for* disability compensation or pension, see M21-, Part III, Subpart ii, 2.B.1.a, or
* survivor benefits, see M21-, Part III, Subpart ii, 2.C.1.b.
 |
| 2 | Since a claim for one benefit can also be a claim for other benefits, consider entitlement to other benefits, if applicable. |
| 3 | * Once the type of claim has been determined, ensure the proper end product (EP) and third-digit modifier (if applicable) has been established.
* Change the EP and/or claim label, or establish a new one, in VBMS or Share, if necessary.

***Reference***: For information on proper EPs, see M21-4, Appendix B. |

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| c. Checking for the Proper Signature | An original claim for any type of benefit must be signed by the* claimant
* parent or guardian of a minor, or
* fiduciary of a claimant who is incompetent.

The following individuals may also sign an application for benefits on behalf of a minor, an incompetent claimant, or a claimant who is physically unable to sign his/her name* a court-appointed representative
* a person who is responsible for care of the claimant, including a spouse or other relative
* an attorney in fact or agent authorized to act on behalf of the individual under a durable power of attorney, or
* the manager or principal officer of an institution that is caring for the claimant.

***Important***: VA accepts signatures on applications that are photocopied or faxed.***References***: For more information on * processing on-line applications, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.A.2.d
* incompetent claimants, see [38 CFR 3.353](http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=efc76cc0c4b5620efb4d7ce426d0e84c&node=se38.1.3_1353&rgn=div8), and
* checking for the proper signature, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.C.2.
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| d. Processing On-Line Applications Without a Signature | While normal development procedures and rules of evidence apply to on-line application claims, the signature requirement for a substantially complete claim is set aside when a claim is filed electronically through an on-line application.The table below summarizes the steps for processing an on-line application for benefits that a claimant submits electronically. |

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| Step | Action |
| 1 | Review the application to ensure it is substantially complete. |
| 2 | Establish the appropriate EP (110, 010, or 180). The date of claim is electronically printed in the upper corner of the on-line application. |
| 3 | Initiate development action by reviewing the claims folder to* determine what evidence is necessary to support the claim, and
* request the evidence from the claimant.
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| ***Exception***: Claims may be submitted by powers of attorney (POAs) through the Stakeholder Enterprise Portal (SEP). Original claims submitted through SEP involve additional signature requirements to be substantially complete.***Reference***: For more information on original claims submission in SEP, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 4.B.2 |

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| **e. Checking for Basic Eligibility to the Benefit Sought** | Consider the basic criteria for eligibility to the benefit sought.***Example***: If the claim is for pension, consider whether or not the Veteran has sufficient wartime service, or if the income and net worth are within limits.***Reference***: For more information about checking basic eligibility, see* M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 2.A.1 and 2, and
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 6.
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| f. Checking for Character of Discharge | If the discharge document shows service that was *not* honorable, general, or under honorable conditions, review the claims folder for an administrative decision on the character of discharge (COD) or bar to benefits.Use the table below to determine VA policies for reviewing the claims folder for an administrative decision. |

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| If … | Then … |
| a decision has *not* been made | see M21-1, Part III, Subpart v, 1.B.1. |
| * an unfavorable character of discharge or statutory bar decision was made
* the decision is valid under current regulations, and
* entitlement to health care was not addressed in the decision
 | * consider whether or not entitlement exists to the [38 U.S.C. 1710](http://law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode38/usc_sup_01_38_10_II_20_17.html) health care provision of *Public Law (PL) 95-126*, enacted October 8, 1977, and
* complete a rating decision for record purposes only in VBMS-R to include the new information.

***Note***: Only the [Chapter 17](http://law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode38/usc_sup_01_38_10_II_20_17.html) statement may be added to an old decision, as a rating decision for record purposes. All other reconsiderations require a new decision. |
| * an unfavorable decision has already been made, but there have been legislative or regulatory changes affecting the reason for the original unfavorable decision, or
* additional evidence was received that was not considered when the first decision was made
 | * reconsider the decision
* after sending notice, allow the claimant 60 days to furnish additional evidence before making an unfavorable decision, and
* prepare a new decision, adding information to address any new laws that may apply.

***Reference:*** For information on the requirement for advance notice, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart v, 1.A.4. |

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| g. Checking for Service Verification | Service verification can be accomplished in various ways. ***Reference***: For a list of acceptable evidence for verification of service, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 6.5. |

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| h. Checking for Blank Spaces on the Application or Insufficient Information | If a claimant omits necessary information on an application, determine if it is substantially complete. ***Reference***: For a list of criteria for substantially complete applications and development actions required if the application is incomplete, see M21-1, Part I, 1.B. |

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| i. Checking for Acceptable Dependency Information | The table below shows the submission requirements for establishing dependents. |

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| **If the claim for dependents was received …** | **Dependency may be established by a(n)** |
| prior to March 24, 2015 | * written statement from a claimant for marital or dependency status if sufficient information is provided. The statement must include the
* month, year, and place of the event (i.e., birth, marriage, adoption)
* full name and relationship of the other person
* Social Security number (SSN) of the person, and
* in cases in which the dependent child does not reside with the claimant, the name and address of the person having custody of the child.
* original document such as a marriage certificate, or a copy of an original document. If the copy does not appear genuine and free from alteration, the copy must be certified by
* a public custodian of records
* any VA employee who is authorized to administer oaths
* certain representatives of Veterans’ service organizations
* certain military personnel, or
* certain officials of approved educational institutions.
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| on or after March 24, 2015 | VA standard form as part of an original application for benefits or on dependency forms including *VA Forms 21-686c Declaration of Status of Dependents* and *21-674 Request for Approval of School Attendance*.***Note***: Fields left blank on the application can be considered *none* as long as sufficient information is present to establish dependency. |

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| ***References***: For more information on* the evidence and information VA requires to establish that a familial relationship exists between a Veteran and another person, see
* [38 CFR 3.204](http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&SID=9da8ddd70837ed5cc14240dfce9e5906&n=sp38.1.3.a&r=SUBPART&ty=HTML#se38.1.3_1204)
* [38 CFR 3.205](http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=efc76cc0c4b5620efb4d7ce426d0e84c&node=se38.1.3_1205&rgn=div8)
* [38 CFR 3.209](http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=efc76cc0c4b5620efb4d7ce426d0e84c&node=se38.1.3_1209&rgn=div8)
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iii, 1.C.1.b, and
* M21-1, Part III, Subpart iii, 5.
* the requirement of standard forms for dependency claims on or after March 24, 2015, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 2.B.1.
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#### 3. Screening Subsequent Claims for Pending Appeals

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| **Introduction** | This topic describes screening and processing subsequent claims that may be duplicative or inextricably intertwined with a pending appeal, including* screening subsequent claims for pending appeals
* processing claims that are duplicative or inextricably intertwined with an appeal, and
* informing the claimant that a duplicate appeal exists for a claimed issue(s).
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| **a. Screening Subsequent Claims for Pending Appeals** | Always check for pending appeals when screening subsequent claims. Identify pending appeals by checking for a * 170 series EP under the CLAIMS tab in VBMS and reviewing the contentions, or
* searching VACOLS and reviewing the ISSUES screen.
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| **b. Processing Claims that are Duplicative or Inextricably Intertwined With an Appeal** | When a claim contention is an exact match for an issue under appeal, consider the contention duplicative of the appeal. When a claimed contention is not an exact match to an issue under appeal, establish a claim for the contention even if the claimed condition may be inextricably intertwined with an issue under appeal.Use the table below for guidance on handling claims that are duplicative possibly inextricably intertwined with an appeal. |

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| **If a claimed condition is ...** | **Then ...** |
| duplicative of an appeal | use the verbiage outlined in M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 1.A.2.c to notify the claimant the issue will be processed under the pending appeal. |
| possibly inextricably intertwined with an appeal | establish the claim in accordance with M21-1, Part III, Subpart ii, 3.D. |

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| ***Notes***:* If a claim is already pending (e.g. EP 020), the contention(s) should be added to the currently pending claim.
* The final determination regarding whether an issue is intertwined will be made by the rating activity or appeals rating activity.

***Reference***: For a definition of an inextricably intertwined claim, see M21-1, Part I, 5.A.1.g. |

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| c. Informing the Claimant That a Duplicate Appeal Exists for Claimed Issue(s) | Upon discovery that a claimed contention is duplicative of a pending appeal, notify the claimant that the issue will be processed as part of the pending appeal.Follow the steps in the table below to generate a letter informing the claimant of a duplicative contention.  |

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| **Stage** | **Description** |
| 1 | Using the Letter Creator tool available on the [Rating Job Aids](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/rating/rat00.htm) web site, select the *Duplicate Documents* letter under the APPEALS tab. |
| 2 | Delete the body of the letter and the enclosure line. |
| 3 | Insert the below text into the body of the letter*On,* ***[long date (e.g. May 12, 2015)]*** *we received the following:** ***[correspondence received (e.g. VA Form 21-0958, Notice of Disagreement)]****.*

*The form included a claim for* ***[claimed condition(s)]****.* ***[Claimed condition(s)]******[is/are]*** *already on appeal and will proceed in accordance with the appellate process.* |
| 4 | Adjust the criteria in the brackets to match the facts found in the claim form. |
| 5 | Send the letter to the claimant. |
| 6 | Associate a copy of the letter with the claims folder. |

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| ***Reference***: For more information on using the Letter Creator, see the [*Letter Creator user Guide*](http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/bl/21/Systems/Docs/Letter%20Creator%20User%20Guide.pdf).  |

#### 4. Individual and Group Responsibilities for Division Mail Management

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| Introduction | This topic describes mail management, including* the importance of effective mail management, and
* individual and group responsibilities.
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| a. Importance of Effective Mail Management  | Effective mail management is crucial to the success and control of workflow. |

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| b. Individual and Group Responsibilities  | The table below describes the individual and group responsibilities for establishing and following procedures for division of mail management and control. |

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| Individual or Group | Responsibilities |
| Veterans Service Center (VSC) or Pension Management Center (PMC), Intake Processing Center (IPC) Coach | * maintains a copy of the *Mail Routing Guide*
* reviews the guide at least once a year to ensure it is current, and
* designates at least one central point where VSC or PMC employees can deliver outgoing mail.

***Note***: To eliminate unnecessary handling, the point of delivery for outgoing mail should also serve as the point of delivery for incoming mail. |
| Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM) or Pension Management Center Manager (PMCM) | * establishes explicit regional office (RO) delivery procedures for all categories of mail, and

ensures that procedures appear in the RO’s *Mail Routing Guide*.***Reference***: For more information on official VA mail procedures, see * [M23-1, Part I, Chapter 1](http://www.warms.vba.va.gov/admin23/m23_1/part1/ch01.doc), and
* [*VA Directive 6340, Mail Management*](http://www.va.gov/vapubs/viewPublication.asp?Pub_ID=43&amp;FType=2).
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| Administrative Support Services Division | establishes local procedures for movement of all mail, including* delivery of incoming mail, and
* pickup of outgoing mail.
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| ***Reference***: For more information on responsibility for RO mail management, see M21-1, Part III, Subpart i, 1.2.c. |